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# THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION OF CHILDREN.

BY SIR OLIVER LODGE.

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## I.

THE teaching of religion to small children is a difficult subject in itself and a subject also of unfortunate controversy.

There are those who say it should be dogmatic; that however reasonably, and with whatever qualifications, propositions may be laid before adults, children require and can assimilate crisp and definite dogma.

There is probably some truth in this contention, but it may easily be misunderstood. Statements concerning fact, if preluded and supported by explanations and illustrations, may properly be summarized in dogmatic form; and in that form may be learned by heart; but elaborate theories, of the nature of ecclesiastical doctrines, are surely not appropriate for children. Dogma, however, cannot be excluded: children want to know something about the nature of man, of the universe and of God; they ask questions on these topics, and they ask questions about nature: one part of religious teaching is to answer these inquiries. Idle and impudent questioning should be discouraged—children are sharp enough to presume, if their sallies are considered amusing; they ought to know, and do know well enough, that these are great and serious topics—but reverent curiosity should be fostered; and then an attempt should be made to satisfy it, so far as we are able, in accordance with all that we know of reality; expressing as much of truth as we think they can understand, and indicating uncertainty where it admittedly exists.

The ultimate object of religious training must be to implant such ideas and habits as shall result in a happy childhood and a sound and useful life. We should not subordinate the life

of the child, too entirely, to the life of the adult; it is a period of preparation truly, but it is something more than that; it is a life-period of value in itself. It is a time of considerable subjective length, and it should be allowed due weight and prominence in the scheme of existence.

At the same time, a respect for "grown-up" people is a natural childish instinct which ought not lightly to be destroyed. The first real gods of a child are his parents, however ungodlike they may be; and hence arises that feeling of security, and nearness of protection and law, which is one of the luxuries of childhood: and, I may add, one of the responsibilities of parenthood.

It is frequently maintained that children should have given to them, by the State, the religion of their parents. Some parents would be better if they had the religion of their children; and we have high authority for the idea that it is possible for adults to learn something from an unsophisticated child,—that childhood, in fact, may be higher in some respects than a subsequent condition.

In too many cases, in our barbarous state of society at present, children do have the religion of their parents; and a great pity it is. In some cases, it is a slum religion of a dangerous and troublesome kind. In another set of extreme cases, not nearly so frequent, it is a religion of mere greed and selfishness and social apathy,—a religion of the trough and sty. For "religion" is the outcome of our ideas about the universe: it is our response to all that we know, consciously or subconsciously, of cosmic law. We all have ideals, unformulated though they may be: our conduct frequently falls short of them; it can seldom or never surpass them.

But, looking at the matter on its best side, if children are to have the religion of the parents, then the parents are the right people to give it. They cannot expect to have it precisely given by deputy.

It is curious how, while the family is the unit for many things, it is not the unit for national education. It is isolated for most domestic purposes, there seems no idea of cooperative management in small matters: there is no cooperative cooking, not much cooperative washing, very little feeding in common, though it is the custom thus to drink. But education and the care of children are largely undertaken cooperatively: a sort of joint-stock

arrangement is good enough for that. It seems to be thought that, though potatoes must be peeled and cooked separately, each household with its own fire and utensils, children can wisely be dealt with by the gross.

Now, it is very likely that cooking for a whole street might be economically and favorably carried out; and a few common social eating-houses for a small district, as at some places abroad, might not be a bad thing; but to undertake the joint education of all the children in such a district, to take them at an early age from their mothers, in order that the said mothers may earn something wherewith to pay the rent, including rates, and otherwise support the family, is not perhaps a perfectly good arrangement. "Our poverty but not our will consents" to it.

Small children require individual attention. In the family, in the ideal family, I mean, they get it: that seems to be the Providential or natural plan; but the conditions of average family life throughout, shall we say, England, are so bad that the State has to step in, and act as foster-parent: though a line is drawn at supplying them with bodily food. Only their minds may be treated by the community.

In discussing religious teaching, we are considering what we term their "souls"; and, however many clouds of glory the average poor child may be trailing, when he arrives on this planet, he has not to wait very long before every trace is completely lost; and "the vision splendid" fades into the light of common day, at a very early stage, I fear, in the infancy of the street urchin. It is a lamentable result of town life, and the struggle for existence, in our complex civilization. I am not sure that it is not a wicked and blasphemous condition of things. I incline to think that it is a bad investment from every point of view; that not only must it be regarded with disfavor in high quarters, but that the resulting outcome is in many respects ruinous and wretched, and such as to torment the sympathies and spoil the lives of all but the utterly thoughtless and selfish.

That nation, or colony, which could ensure that its children should spend their short and vital early years among healthy, happy surroundings, suited to their time of life and state of development, and leading to a good robust serviceable manhood and womanhood,—that nation would in a few generations stand out from among the rest of the world as something almost

superhuman. The idea seems remote, the path towards its attainment too difficult; yes, but that is partly because too few realize it as an ideal, too few are aware of any such problem before them. They have no such aim: and without proper aim we are not likely to hit the mark. I do not believe that the problem is insoluble: I believe that some day it will be solved. Human life is not always going to be the failure that it is at present. Crime and vice and besotted stupidity are not always going to have it their own way. We owe it to the children to give them a fair and decent chance of understanding the world, and of living in it with pleasure and human profit.

People will say that it would cost too much. Nothing of the kind can cost too much! What is the meaning of life? What is this planet for? Consider those questions, and then consider whether as yet we have learned, or even effectively tried, to answer them in any reasonable manner: whether we are not hopelessly befogged by custom and buried beneath the relics of barbarous times. Taking control over the processes of evolution, in one way or another, is part of our serious duty: and no such duty is really divorced from practical religion.

I urge that attention to, and instruction in, physical conditions is a part of true religious teaching; and that many social reforms—such as purifying and revolutionizing the physical atmosphere of towns, such as reafforesting and beautifying waste and desolate places, such as restoring the humanizing influence of simple wholesome natural surroundings—must have an indirect but incalculable moral effect, and will indirectly aid the work of religion: a work which is now hampered and frustrated by untoward surroundings and other remediable and unnecessary defects.

However, we must leave the huge and complicated question of a better general social organization—though that ought to be the outcome of every religious belief if it is healthy—and limit ourselves to the consideration of how the average home or school can best be made a place of religious education. What should we teach our own children? What sort of religion is suited to the child's mind? What will bring forth the best fruit? For, surely, it is by the fruit of a good and developed life that any system must ultimately be judged. Good and faithful service is the end and aim.

It is not natural to the child to think that the world exists for his pleasure and profit; it is natural to him to wish to be of use. He is happy when he feels that he is helpful; and the docility with which children flock to the monotonous grind of wage-earnings, apparently without question of its utility, is pathetic. There are only a few children, or youths rather, who without social rebuke are permitted to regard the world from a wholly selfish point of view, if they choose; but these are in a non-natural condition,—they need not exert themselves for a living—they inherit the religion of their parents.

## II.

Now let us consider what it is that we are aiming at in teaching little children. I asked an experienced and somewhat inspired teacher of infants (the Principal of the Edgbaston Kindergarten) for some ideas on this subject; and she was good enough to send me a few notes or thoughts, which, though not intended for publication, I propose to reproduce. They are as follows:

“The religious education of little children ought to have the attributes of *Indirectness* and *Continuousness*. It should be indirect,—that is to say, not always consciously given under the name of religion: and continuous,—not once a week, or on specified occasions only, but always, and in the simple acts of life.

“By ‘religious education’ I mean an effort on the part of the adult to form such habits of body and mind, and such aspirations of soul, as shall tend towards a clean heart and the ultimate condition of a realization of unity with the Divine Spirit of Good. We worship this spirit—God—through his manifestations in Man, in Animals and in Plants, and in the expression (craftsmanship) of man which is (or ought to be) Art.

“Accordingly, a teacher of little children is teaching religion when she tries to form the elementary habits of cleanliness, order, punctuality and courtesy. (These qualities are necessary if we wish to show love to our fellows.) She is teaching religion when she helps her children to make animals—wild or domestic—happy and responsive. She is teaching religion when she helps her children to take care of their gardens, plants and flowers,—to leave beautiful things to grow in their own green world, to exercise self-control in a country lane in June.

“When a teacher touches her class with a beautiful song, picture or poem,—the history of our planet and other planets, and all the natural lore of the world—she is giving religious teaching. If she turns the instinct of destruction into one of creation, if she helps a self-centred child to make himself useful by preparing the accessories for the next lesson, if she teaches her pupils to respect persons and property,—all this is part of religion.

"Above all, the imagination, the emotions and the sense of reverence for Beauty—anything which awakens these qualities—must be religious teaching; for are they not the roads leading to love, which is God?"

"And all these things are taught not by words, but by doings—by action. They are not taught one day and left out of the next day's plan; they are not taught by one special kind of action, but by constant repetition under all the different forms which are supplied by the natural activities of a sane and happy life in the school or home."

### III.

Now, clearly, this kind of practical every-day real education is or should be the work of an ideal home, as well as of a school. It is the homes that make our children what they are—for better, for worse,—and parents cannot really throw their responsibilities on others, however much they may try.

But in addition to all this practical and homely teaching, it will be said, there must be some doctrinal teaching, too: there must be some instruction in the elements of revealed or spiritual or theoretical religion.

Yes, that is generally admitted—though not universally. But, whatever doctrines are imparted, I venture to maintain that religious theory for children should not be based extensively on the doctrine of sin: it is not a natural or wholesome idea for them, as a foundation for religion, and its conventional treatment at revival meetings is apt to be terrifying. Children are not wicked, in the sense intended by those denunciations; they have their fits of temper, and they may be bad and disobedient, like animals; they may be even vicious, like them,—though, probably, that is an artificially made condition; moreover, if not properly instructed in social virtues, they may imitate their remote ancestors in lying and theft, and they may certainly be "spoiled"; but, when small, they must be largely the product of heredity and environment, and it is not fair to inflict on them theological doctrines concerning sin.

Considered from the point of view of evolution, healthy infancy under favorable conditions must be regarded as a period of innocence. It may be a question, therefore, as to what need there is for Theology at all. Why either frighten them with, or protect them from, ideas like those of the Pilgrim's Progress, about hell and Apollyon, the burden of guilt, the wrath to come, and the like? One answer is, I think, because such ideas are

natural to undeveloped humanity; all savages have frightened themselves by vague imaginings, by sacrifices or propitiations, have sought to mitigate Divine wrath; and the untaught or badly taught notions of children about the universe are liable to be *more* terrifying than what we conceive to be the reality, not less. The childish atmosphere is full of potential superstition; and nurses or companions are sure to waken it sooner or later. The fact is, you do not avoid superstition by eliminating the idea of God. A writer, whom I shall quote directly, says: "It is clear that, unless you fortify a child against the fancies inherited from a dim and partly savage past, by teaching the clear protective personality [or, rather, aspect] of God, you leave it a prey to dark thoughts and terrible fear."

It is idle to suppose that a child can long be screened from the religious ideas of mankind; it is our business, therefore, to see that the teaching is of a right and helpful, and, so far as we know, true kind. Moreover, the Bible is part of their heritage, to which they have a right to be introduced; and they should also be helped to realize the advantages of belonging to some recognized community, for fellowship and brotherly help.

Here, however, enter difficulties. We are face to face just now with two momentous problems. How far does the Bible still hold its place as the supreme treasure-house of religious and ethical teaching? And of what value are the traditional rites and ceremonies, the outward symbols of various religious beliefs, in the spiritual education of our children?

To consider the latter question briefly first: It is unfortunately manifest that, in admitting, and still more in emphasizing, the value of ceremonies, we may get dangerously near to the arena of sectarian conflict, and drearily far from the spirit of true religion. Nevertheless, it is true that the religious instinct in most people, like the artistic instinct, struggles for some definite and appropriate expression in incarnate form. And though it seems probable that the religious instinct, as it strengthens within us, may ultimately urge us to materialize or express our beliefs through the higher organization of social life, rather than through the machinery of ecclesiastical ritual, yet it must be admitted that certain church influences—such as the definite occasion for attention to spiritual things, the fellowship of spirit, and the association of certain simple human acts with high

thoughts,—give every religious sect a powerful opportunity for aiding the development of a child's soul, if they can be rightly utilized.

To pass to the other point—the value of the Bible in children's education: In so far as the Bible is unsuitable, or too grown up (and seeing that it is the literature of a people extending over many centuries, such unsuitability is not in the least surprising), the compilation by Mr. Mackail called "*Biblum Innocentium*" may be mentioned as an attractive temporary substitute or introduction. A recent book by an experienced teacher, Mr. Mitchell, recently of the University Men's Training College at Liverpool, now a vicar in Sheffield, called "How to Teach the Bible" (Williams & Norgate), contains some useful hints and elementary information. Among the hints I select the following two points: (1) That the Gospels are from their structure ready fashioned for the work of the teacher,—wonderfully perfect, he says, from this point of view; and (2) that the Gospel of Mark is a short, swiftly moving dramatic history; divisible perhaps into two parts, the first mainly relating to events in Galilee, previous to acceptance of the name of the Messiah; and the second half relating to subsequent events in Judæa. It can be read through at one sitting, or at most two; it is only half the length of "Hamlet," and not very much longer than the story of Joseph and his brethren.

That is one mode of dealing with a Gospel narrative, and it is a method insufficiently practised by adults; but, in my experience, even Mark is too long to be understood in that way by children. The material is of unequal value, and I doubt if children can carry away much from a comprehensive scamper over the ground.

Other parts of other Gospels, every one knows, are of the most striking character, and very appropriate for learning by heart. It is difficult to see how a teacher can go wrong in dealing with the Gospels; though, unfortunately, experience shows that it is possible, and that even such a subject as the Parables can be spoiled by making them technically a school subject, and submitting them to the labored treatment supposed to be suitable for examination purposes. Exact treatment, based upon scholarship and real information, can be most interesting to adults; but spurious or imitation-exact treatment, devised by parent or

teacher without scholarship and with no real information, is to everybody instinctively repellent.

Other parts of the Bible, such as some of the Psalms and the Prophetic Books, are manifestly of great value; but they are for the most part only appropriate to elder children, in my judgment. The teaching of the Prophets is, indeed, urgently needed by many in the nation to-day.

There is so much that is thus good, from every point of view, that there has been recently a tendency on the part of some Education Authorities to select these manifestly worthy portions exclusively, and to avoid reading the more archaic and, so to speak, bloodthirsty books, such as Judges, Kings, and Genesis, altogether.

But these are the parts which children like; and I do not think we need be too squeamish. That which was appropriate to the early stages of the race will be more or less appropriate also to the early stages of the individual; and, if a child does not understand future literary and popular references to the chief names and events therein recorded, his education is lamentably deficient.

But I cannot say that I am able to attach much, perhaps not any, moral significance to these dramatic stories of ancient times. They are exceedingly interesting, from an adult point of view, and instructive as to early human ideas, but are not easily apprehended in the historic sense by children; who often fail to discriminate between a very ancient and a more modern period, or even between the Old and the New Testaments.

#### IV.

In order to ascertain what sort of notions has been formed in their early days by children who were still young enough not entirely to have forgotten those days,—which I am afraid is the case with many of us,—I catechised in a friendly manner a small class of children, of a reasonably intelligent and fairly favored kind. I think it may be interesting if I give a summary of the sort of questions and answers that went on; it being understood that the questions were elaborated and expressed in such a way as to be intelligible, not put in the curt form here set down.

Q. 1.—“*What parts of the Bible first impressed you, when very small?*”

Child A.—“I think the Ark, because I was interested in the animals, how they went in and what they would do there.”

*Child B.*—"I remember best about Gideon and the lamps, the breaking of the crockery and the attack in the sudden glare."

*Child C.*—"I used to like about Samson."

*Child D.*—"The flood, because it seemed the kind of thing that might happen again."

*Child E (rather wearily).*—"I suppose all that about Joseph."

*Child F.*—"I remember the man sowing; for there was a picture of it outside the book. I think I liked the pictures, and did not care for the words."

Very well, then, save for the pictorial exception, so far, we have Noah, Gideon, Samson Joseph: all in Judges and Genesis.

Q. 2.—"Did these stories affect your conduct and make you better children?"

*General Chorus.*—"Oh no. It has nothing to do with that; they were just stories!"

*Child A.*—"But not quite like other stories—more like history, perhaps, yet not like history."

*Child B.*—"No; people used to read them in a different way, so they felt different; but still they were stories."

Q. 3.—"Do you remember the first times of going to church?"

A.—"Yes; we used to look at the people: we did not understand at all, but in the sermon the preacher repeated one word many times, so I remembered that. I told it to my father, and he was pleased."

Q. 4.—"Do you remember saying your first prayers?"

A.—"Yes; but they had no meaning; it was just a going on of words—rather like gibberish. I remember asking [a slightly elder brother] whether it meant anything. It afterwards dawned on me that there was a meaning in the words, though still it felt like saying them over to mother or to nurse; though I remember that mother tried to explain about it."

*Another child.*—"My first religious recollection was saying the name 'Jesus' along with other names, and nurse told me never to use that word; so I felt there was something strange about it."

Q. 5.—"Very well, then, come to the New Testament; what do you first remember about Christ?"

*Child A.*—"Oh, I remember about the manger, and when he was twelve and the shepherds; but we got that from a hymn,—in fact, we got several things from hymns, especially those we had to say every night."

*Child B.*—"I used to like things about bushels and candlesticks, and things in Matthew; I am not sure whether that is Old or New Testament."

*Child C.*—"I think we like the New, now we are bigger; and some parts we used to like when small, such as the Parables."

[Town children, I fear, may be becoming inaccessible to some of the Parables.]

*Child D.*—"And I remember liking the Sermon on the Mount, because it said, 'Blessed are the dressmakers,'—or so I thought for some time."

Q. 6.—"How do you like the Bible now?"

*General Opinion.*—"Oh, now we are doing dull parts; it does not seem to have stories like it used to. Solomon is a dull part."

*Another child.*—"When we did Acts at school, it was horrid."

Q. 7.—"Well, do you think the New Testament affected your conduct?"

A.—"No, I do not think so."

Q. 8.—"Then, what makes you such good children?"

A.—"Oh, it is not the Bible at all—nothing to do with that. A book like 'Being and Doing' might do us good."

*Another child (a small one).*—"I think that the Bible, now we are older, might do us good perhaps."

Q. 9.—"How do you know the difference between right and wrong?"

A.—"When you have done a thing wrong you feel it; you do not need people to tell you. But, anyhow, people do tell you. What they tell us may have an effect, but it has nothing to do with reading: it is mostly what we feel in ourselves."

Well, it is very incomplete, but I am sure it is true, so far as it goes, though I am doubtful what the full moral that might be drawn from a more extended inquiry of this kind might be. Something, I think, in the direction of the indirect and continuous influence of a good home, and the intercourse with each other and with friendly adults; without, necessarily, so very much *ad hoc* teaching, beyond what is necessary for literature, and for the purpose of answering serious questions about the problems of existence, such as rationally occur to children—not forcing them to receive answers before there is a chance of their being ready for them,—before, in fact, either question or answer has any real meaning.

Faith and trust in the Love and Goodness underlying the universe seem to me the most vital and helpful thing; this is able to remove a mass of terror and unreasoning suspicion,—quite natural to a being rising to consciousness in an immense universe, in which it is helpless, and of which it feels ignorant.

Ignorant, no doubt, to a great extent, we all are; but what we have of good hope and trust we should endeavor to impart to children, whether it appears to us specifically religious or not, so long as it appears definitely true. Much of it *must* be told as the result of our larger experience, and therefore must be in a sense dogmatic. This is the sort of dogmatic teaching that is legitimate; but, with doubtful and critical questions of ecclesi-

astical theology, it does not seem to me that children have anything to do, or that such ideas have any practical effect. Such effect as they do have can hardly be regarded as altogether wholesome; much dread has been caused by them: it is rather cruel to inflict them on the receptive and docile mind of a child. If a child were to take seriously views expressed at some religious gatherings, and were to mope about its own salvation, it would be rather pitiful; if it were to pray for the conversion of its schoolfellows, instead of joining in their games, it would be monstrous. Healthy children do not do these things; their goodness is of another and higher order, not based upon a sickly consciousness of sin. And, so far as Christ is recorded to have dealt with children, He never thought of convicting them of evil; rather they were held up as examples of simple-hearted and natural goodness, such as we might learn from in the spirit, while we trained the body and taught the mind.

There is, however, a certain sort of dogma which we may wisely and circumspectly and reverently teach to children, if we think that there are fundamental facts which should precede initiation into the details of those differentiated doctrines which at present unhappily divide Christendom. Last year I drew up, and published as a small book, a Catechism of what I thought were the fundamentals of Christian faith, in a form suited to teachers and adults, for use with children from the adult's own standpoint; to be supplemented and enlarged and modified in accordance with personal conviction,—without which no religious teaching can be worthy of the name. I am now drafting a much-simplified statement, so as to summarize the essential features in a form more directly intelligible to children, and appropriate for learning by heart. This task is more difficult than the other, but it does not appear to be impossible; and it is hoped that it may be found a useful auxiliary to the larger document.

OLIVER LODGE.